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ABSTRACT

The Kindergarten Center in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, promotes the philosophy that children of kindergarten age acquire knowledge in ways that are different from the way older children learn. Younger children learn best through direct sensory encounters with the world and not through formal academic processes. The integrated Kindergarten Center curriculum is imbued with the whole language philosophy, but reflects a balance of all areas of learning. Many activities at the Center rely on cooperative learning, a hands-on approach, and the encouragement of conversations that enable children to reason and communicate with each other. The Center, which houses all of the socially and economically diverse kindergarten children in the district, is unique in many respects. Support services provided at the Center include those of a teacher of English as a Second Language, speech therapist, nurse, reading specialist, and rhythm and movement teacher. Services are also provided by a variety of community agencies and associations. The staff and parents work collaboratively to reach desired goals, and parents, after some initial resistance to the change, are supportive of the Center. Students are assessed using the Early Screening Inventory, teacher rankings, a reading readiness test, and the Stanford Achievement Test. This description of the Center includes information on costs, the qualifications of key personnel, first grade SAT scores, and a discussion of the transportability of the practice. (AC)

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PHOENIXVILLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

THE KINDERGARTEN CENTER: AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CONCEPT

JANET M. TREZZA, PRINCIPAL

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THE KINDERGARTEN CENTER: AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CONCEPT

I. ABSTRACT

The Kindergarten Center Concept is a practice which promotes the philosophy that children of kindergarten age acquire knowledge in ways that are very different from the way older children learn. Younger children learn best through direct sensory encounters with the world and not through formal academic processes. Consequently, the content of the curriculum reflects a balance of all areas of learning. In an integrated curriculum, learning is regarded as a process rather than a collection of facts.

A well designed early childhood program takes into account the fact that the thinking processes of children in early childhood years are indeed different from those of older children. Finally, the philosophy, goals and objectives of the program would be incomplete without the core component of communicating and working with parents. The administration and staff firmly believe that the Home and School work as a team to achieve common goals.

II. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The salient premise of the program is that all children can learn because children are born wanting to learn. The Kindergarten Center curriculum is imbued with the whole language philosophy. Thematic units, good literature, hands-on activities, and play are basic tools which turn children on to the love of books, reading, inquiry and investigation. The language experience stories help children to learn the natural blend of speaking, writing, and reading. The area of play is crucial because what looks like play to an adult is actually the work of children developing an understanding of the world. Studies show that the most effective way to teach young kids is to capitalize on their natural inclination to learn through play.

The Kindergarten Center is unique in many respects since the staff and parents work collaboratively to reach desired goals. The staff also collaborates in areas of cooperative planning and teaching. Ideas and materials are shared freely and the staff has a broader vision of thinking and planning developmentally appropriate practices for all children in all of the classrooms as opposed to planning for "a classroom" of children. The staff has also been empowered to make changes which benefit the children, the parents, and the program.

Each member of the staff has a Curriculum guide and they were involved in writing this guide. It is also available for parent review.

The Kindergarten Center is housed in a rented facility which was an unused school building. It is centrally located in the borough of Phoenixville and all children are bussed to and from the center. One can appreciate the climate of the building upon entering the facility. It exudes a clean, warm, caring atmosphere where children, parents and staff have ownership. Visiting the building a language-rich and print-rich environment can be observed. The 1991-92 school year accommodated 309 children which included a.m. and p.m. sessions. The Phoenixville Area School District is an economically diverse community in that it comprises a jointure of three areas, Phoenixville Borough, Schuylkill Township, and East Pikeland Township.

III. DESCRIPTION OF PRACTICE

1. Services provided and activities conducted: The staff is heavily involved in collaborative learning and cooperative learning. Through collegial support, ideas are created and shared. All programs and activities focus on being developmentally appropriate for the age level and are specifically geared toward kindergarten children. The curriculum fits the child as opposed to having the child fit in with the curriculum.

   The Kindergarten Center is rich in the following support services and activities:
   - An ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher
   - A speech therapist
   - A nurse
   - A Home & School Visitor
   - CYS - Children and Youth Services of Chester County
   - A reading specialist
   - A guidance counselor who works with staff and children and heads a "Child Study Team" comprised of the building administrator, the guidance counselor, and relevant teaching staff. Parents are also involved.
   - A rhythm and movement teacher who works with music and gross motor movements
   - A strong parent commitment! The Home and School Association is a backbone of support - they provide significant extras for the children and the Center.
   - Many outside agencies come to the Center to present programs on safety, poison awareness, fire prevention, health, artist in residence, SPCA, etc.
   - The Center is also aligned with the Senior Citizen Center. Our children visit the senior citizens and perform for them and the seniors come to the Center to read to the children.
   - Each year in the month of January, Kindergarten Center

children participate in a Teddy Bear Picnic. Many parents come into the classes to make nutritious picnic snacks with the children. Children bring teddy bears and blankets to school, each class performs a skit and the teaching staff performs an adaptation of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" for the parents. This is a daytime production and parents bring their young children with them to enjoy the performance.

- The Home and School Association enlists parents to dress up in costume and perform for the children as Corduroy (the bear) and Ali-gator. They also provide programs for children such as the Franklin Institute on "flight", Chief Halftown, folk singers and storytellers.
- Teachers provide walking tours to the post office and the public library. In the Spring of the year every child gets a library card and is encouraged to use them.
- In May or early June the teachers escort the kindergarten children to visit their first grade schools so that they may meet the principal and first grade teachers.
- In late August an orientation tea is held for new parents and students. Parents are encouraged to bring their children to meet the teachers and visit their classrooms.
- The principal initiated a program called, "I Read to the Principal." During the spring of the year, children who have just begun to read visit the principal to read a book. Upon completion, the children receive a button which says, "I Read to the Principal."

2. Rationale for inclusion of the practice in the program and statement of needs adressed:

At the Kindergarten Center the staff works cooperatively and collaboratively to enhance learning for all children. The climate is one that stimulates growth, not only in the children as it is inclusive of the administration, the staff and the parents as well.

The Kindergarten Center was established because the elementary schools lacked enough space to house the growing population of children. Consequently, all kindergarten children throughout the district were housed in one central location.

The Kindergarten Center has been instrumental in bringing all children of diverse economic and social backgrounds together so that they can learn from each other and appreciate differences in one another. The Kindergarten Center is a community of children waiting to be discovered and it is one in which all children learn and grow from day to day and all year long.

3. Description of the target population including rationale and criteria for inclusion:

Children who come to the Center are from the ages of 4½ to 6 years old. Many of our children come from five preschools in the area and we try to maintain close contact as well as a working relationship with these preschools. As most families have two working parents, we try to accommodate them as much as possible. To attend the Kindergarten Center, a child must be 5 years old by January 31st.

Since children come to the Center from all sections of the district, there is a representation of varied ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds in all classrooms which provides a good mixture of diversity.

4. Justification that the practice is a quality practice.

One of the most consistent research findings is that cooperative learning activities improve children's relationships with peers, especially those of different social and ethnic groups. Slavin (1980) notes: "Cooperative learning methods [sanctioned by the school] embody the requirements of cooperative, equal status interaction between students of different ethnic backgrounds." Consequently, cooperative learning is an integral part of the Kindergarten Center's philosophy and program.

Four year olds and five year olds learn best by interacting with people and concrete objects and by trying to solve real problems. They also learn best when things relate to their own experience. Many activities at the Center rely on the hands-on approach and engaging children in conversation because this enables children to reason and communicate with one another. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget indicates that between the ages of 6 and 9, children begin to think abstractly instead of concretely and some of our children do think in the abstract mode. We strive for encouragement and enrichment at each child's developmental stage.

Children deserve kindness, guidance and respect. Consequently, the administration and staff use guidance techniques such as redirection, positive reinforcement, and encouragement to enhance the learner's self-esteem. In addition, these techniques are communicated to parents so that the home and school become partners in working toward the same goals.

1. Slavin, Robert. Cooperative Learning: Student Teams. West Haven, CT: NEA Professional Library, 1984

The principal holds monthly meetings for any new parents of kindergarten children who move into the district. The Kindergarten Center philosophy, curriculum, services and activities are explained. This is followed by a tour of the building and a question and answer period. Many parents have appreciated the extension of courtesy. Some parents call back and ask to have a private consultation about their child. These parents are accommodated and greatly appreciate the time spent with them. These procedures show parents that we genuinely care about them and their children.

Since the principal highly regards and respects the wisdom of others, she does not consider herself an instructional leader but an educational leader who mobilizes the expertise, talent, and care of others. When we combine the expertise of teachers and parents, the children are the beneficiaries.

The Kindergarten Center has provided in-depth support to handicapped children as well as "at risk" children and has worked closely with their parents and outside agencies. The Kindergarten Center also makes every effort to accommodate working parents or those who have other inherant problems.

Dr. Kay Wright, regional representative for the United States Secretary of Education, visited the Kindergarten Center in January, 1991 and was impressed with the educational opportunities the Kindergarten Center offered to children and to the teachers. She also felt that this organizational practice and program design could easily be used as a model in other states or regions of the country.

5. Costs for this practice

Costs include:

*Cost per student	2,522.00
Rental of facility	12,000.00
Electricity	5,578.00
Heat	7,238.08
Sewer	1,000.00
Water	1,000.00
Teacher Aides (2)	14,706.00
*Supplies	9,520.60
*Transportation	120,000.00
*Teacher Salaries	263,306.18

*These costs are not additional expenses as they would be the same amount of money in the Home Schools.

V. PERSONNEL INVOLVEMENT

List of Key Personnel and background relating to this practice:

°MR. DENNIS G. BLANTON, SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

Mr. Blanton is a strong proponent and avid supporter of early childhood programs. He personally initiated a preschool summer program for "at risk" children in the Phoenixville Area School district. It has proven to be an outstanding program worthy of national recognition. He is also a key communicator for children, parents, staff, and the community. Mr. Blanton has received eminence as a Temple University Distinguished Scholar for his academic achievements as well as his ability to articulate and follow through with creative ideas and programs. He is a listener as well as a doer; he makes things happen and he has a vision toward the future.

At the invitation of Mr. James Sheffer, Chief of Compensatory Programs at PDE, Mr. Blanton will be presenting the Preschool Summer Program at the annual PAFPC (Pennsylvania Association of Federal Program Coordinators) Conference in the Spring of 1993.

°MRS. JANET M. TREZZA, PRINCIPAL

Mrs. Trezza's background includes - classroom teacher (early grades and beyond), reading specialist, reading supervisor, federal program specialist, and principal. Under her direction Phoenixville's Chapter I reading program Reading Improvement by Teaching Effectively (RITE) was nationally validated by the U. S. Department of Education's Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP) on September 9, 1985. Mrs. Trezza served as a developer, disseminator of the RITE program as it is part of the National Diffusion Network.

In 1964, Mrs. Trezza wrote and started a program for the first kindergarten classes at East Pikeland school which is now part of the Phoenixivlle Area School District. For the past eight years she has been a guest lecturer at West Chester University (PA) speaking to graduate students including reading specialists and early childhood majors.

Mrs. Trezza will be presenting the Kindergarten Center Concept on October 13, 1992 at the Keystone State Reading Association Conference at Seven Springs Mountain Resort, Champion, PA, and on October 19, 1992 at the PAFPC (Pennsylvania Association of Federal Program Coordinators) Region II Parent Training Awareness Conference at Split Rock Resort and Conference Center, Lake Harmony, PA.

Published works include Poetry A to Z, Hayes Publishing Co., 1972, "Reading For Sale," Resources in Education (ERIC) June 83, Vol. 18, No. 6, Articles in Creative Teacher Magazine and Learning Magazine.

°CLASSROOM TEACHERS

The seven teachers employed at the Kindergarten Center have extensive experience in early childhood. They are all seasoned kindergarten teachers who have worked in our district. Their degrees range from Bachelors to Masters and some are still pursuing graduate work in early childhood. They are all familiar with the latest early childhood research. In addition, they are empowered to make decisions which will benefit the children and the programs. They are dedicated and conscientious as they perform above and beyond what is required. One teacher operated a private preschool program for five years. She also co-authored our handbook for parents and children.

°MRS. KAREN GLEASON, KINDERGARTEN SECRETARY

Mrs. Gleason is extremely proficient and uses her skills to accommodate all of the personnel who work in the school. She is a good communicator with parents and staff and is excellent in dealing with children. She is dedicated, conscientious, and thorough in all that she does. She is a definite asset to our program because through her efforts, all systems run smoothly and efficiently.

°SUPPORT PERSONNEL:

1. Guidance counselor and school psychologist - see children who are at risk, and set up Child Study Teams to help these children. A Child Study Team is composed of the school psychologist, the guidance counselor, the classroom teacher, the reading specialist, and the principal.
2. Reading Specialists - observe and work with children when teachers need more input on specific strategies.
3. Nurse - attends to medical records and health status of children.
4. Home & School Visitor - is contacted by the school when there seems to be a problem in the home or with the child.
5. Rhythm & Movement Teacher - works with the children on gross motor movements while using music and exercises.
6. Art Teacher - consults with teachers and assists within the classrooms to develop themes for special occasions.
7. Aides (2) - are employed to help teachers in the building. They collect money and order milk. They help supervise children getting on and off busses and they also help teachers in the classrooms on a rotating basis.

V. EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

Qualitative measures:

Each school year West Chester University and Cabrini College send us many student teachers, so that we have become a training ground for those who aspire to be in the field of early childhood.

The establishment of a Kindergarten Center presented an element of change in the district and the community. Not all parents were happy with the arrangement but three weeks into the program, a decided reversal took place. Those parents who opposed the idea began to take ownership of the building in which their children were learning and they became our strongest supporters. Our first Home and School Association was a huge success and the Center profited by their tremendous efforts and generosity. Comments from parents are as follows: Home & School President, Liz Carrabine said, "The Kindergarten Center is full of fun things and there's always something going on. There's no pressure to act like the big kids. The programs we have are geared just to kindergarteners." Susan Palcko said, "I like this solution a lot more. They get a lot more attention. It's really positive....it was a good idea to go that route."

Speakers and entertainers who come to visit write complimentary letters about the organizational framework of the Center and the advantages it offers young children. Robert Smythe, Puppeteer/Storyteller said, "As a new parent I must say now that I think that parents in every school district should let their children have the opportunity to start the school experience with all of their peers"..."I believe you have found at the Kindergarten Center a studio setting where individuals can recharge their creative batteries and return to their work energized and ready to impart the greatest lesson of education: Learning is fun!" The Kindergarten Center is also visited by various teachers and administrators from other school districts in the nearby area as they plan for the future. Mr. Richard Glaab, who is a principal of the American School in Dahran, Saudi Arabia, spent a full morning discussing the organizational procedures in setting up an early childhood center. He wanted to establish a center in Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Kay Wright, regional representative for the U.S. Secretary of Education also endorsed the practice of the Kindergarten Center. Dr. Wright said the Kindergarten Center concept could

easily be used in other areas. She said it allows kindergarten teachers to interact with one another and establish some collegiality. She also said it provides for bringing in special programs directed at only one age group. The Kindergarten Center also enlists the expertise of parents. Dr. Susan Ward, chemist and kindergarten parent, combined her scientific and parental interests in an ecology project sponsored by the Home & School Association. It was a huge success. Children learned about ecology and increased their understanding and vocabulary through this project. Each year many parents and visitors send us letters of gratitude and appreciation.

Enrollment for the first year was 266, the second year was 299, and the third year was 309. The Kindergarten Center staff affected changes in curriculum, report cards, conferences, and scheduling. Additional support staff were assigned to the Center and for the first time in the history of the school district, children ages 4½ to 6 years old were given more attention, concentration, and advantages never before offered to them.

Quantitative measures:

An ESI (Early Screening Inventory) is given to each child who registers for kindergarten in the spring of each year. The purpose of this testing is to identify "at risk" children and to recommend to parents that they send their children to the summer preschool program. Children who attend this program get a head start on kindergarten in the fall term.

Results of the teacher ranking and Reading Readiness scores are conclusive in that teachers were quite accurate in knowing their children as is evidenced by 82% of childen ranked 1 or 2 and 81% of children scoring at or above the readiness score. (see page 10)

Stanford Achievement Test results indicate the same basic predictions in first grade as evidenced by 85% on the complete battery of all schools which reflects the percentage of children in the middle to high range on this test. Percentages for individual schools are also noted. See page 10, last column (to the far right) for all percentages in the M to H range.

PHOENIXVILLE READINESS TEST **5/90 (END OF KINDERGARTEN)**

1. Number Tested.....265

2. Teacher Ranking Prior to Readiness Test: 1, 2, 3, 4

*Key
1. This child is certain to read well
2. This child should do average work
3. I am doubtful about this child
4. This child has little chance of success

No. of children ranked 1 or 2 by teacher prior to test:

218 or 82%

3. No. scoring 123 or higher on Readiness Test:

214 or 81%

STANFORD ACHIEVEMENT TEST **4/91** **GRADE 1** **1990-91**

TESTS	NO. TESTED	MEAN RAW SCORE	MEAN SCALED SCORE	NATL INDIV. PR-S	LOCAL INDIV. PR-S	GE OF MEDIAN SS	% IN EACH AAC RANGE L	M	H	% IN M TO H RANGE
SCHUYLKILL SCHOOL										
Total Reading	84	79	537	58-5	47-5	2.0	24	46	30	76
Total Math	84	64	528	61-6	50-5	2.1	12	55	32	87
Complete Battery	84	259	542	63-6	48-5	2.1	13	49	38	(87)
EAST PIKELAND SCHOOL										
Total Reading	74	94	579	84-7	76-6	2.7	6	44	51	95
Total Math	74	72	550	80-7	73-6	2.5	4	51	45	96
Complete Battery	74	296	566	86-7	76-6	2.7	6	31	63	(94)
BARKLEY SCHOOL										
Total Reading	84	71	521	44-5	35-4	1.7	27	45	27	72
Total Math	84	57	511	43-5	31-4	1.7	24	50	26	76
Complete Battery	84	234	528	45-5	31-4	1.8	26	38	36	(74)
Second Avenue School										
Total Reading	20	67	510	36-4	27-4	1.5	40	50	10	60
Total Math	20	63	525	58-5	46-5	2.0	10	45	45	90
Complete Battery	20	240	531	49-5	35-4	1.7	10	65	25	(90)
ALL SCHOOLS										
Total Reading	262	80	542	61-6	50-5	2.1	21	46	33	79
Total Math	262	64	529	61-6	50-5	2.2	14	51	35	86
Complete Battery	262	260	544	64-6	50-5	2.2	15	42	43	(85)

VI. TRANSPORTABILITY

This practice would definitely work well in other areas of the Commonwealth. The district would need a school large enough to handle the target population. Ideally, it should be a facility that provides room in which to grow if population increases and there should also be access for the handicapped.

In today's world there is an eminent need to concentrate on early intervention. In a program design such as the Kindergarten Center the central thrust is based on early childhood philosophy, strong parent involvement, and parent training. A Kindergarten Center not only focuses on children ages 4½ to 6, but it leads the way for opening vistas to preschool programs and parent training as well.

A salient condition in starting a Center is to communicate with parents and include them in the visitations and explanations so that they could be aware of greater advantages for their children. Another condition would be bussing. It's important to make this convenient and safe for the parents and the children. Kindergarten children are bussed both ways - from home to school and from school to home.

Any area adopting this practice should visit the Kindergarten Center to see how such a facility operates.